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Some Discussions on Functionalist Housing and its Economics in Romania by the Late 1950s and Early 1960s

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In November 1958, the Romanian Workers' Party launched a new economic program. After several years of economic stagnation and faltering public investments, the communist bosses announced a new approach to industrialization. Unlike the early 1950s, when most financial resources were directed towards several key industrial sites while social matters were ignored altogether, by the late 1950s the political leadership took a slightly different path and promised to balance the growth of heavy and light industries. Furthermore, several other measures, including raising the employees' wages, cutting some commodities' prices, and building state-funded dwellings, would have made the industrialization effort more bearable for the workers. Such goals carried both ideological and strategic connotations. On the one hand, an expanding industry would have raised the proletarians' number, thus broadening the social basis for the regime's legitimacy. On the other hand, modernizing Romania in this way, and in a certain sense even against Moscow's will, rendered the conflict with the Soviet Union unavoidable¹. However, archival evidence unveils that the national party bosses showed little concern for the latter issue. On the contrary, as many political statements issued at the time flesh out, the country's leadership was committed to carrying out the new industrialization project in its own terms. Nevertheless, the financial resources available were limited and hard to get by. In fact, as some party members pointed out, expanding industrial infrastructure in tandem with improving the living standards loomed itself complicated given that over the previous years the country's economic performance has been scarce². Adopting the new economic path, therefore, opened ample public debates about better

¹ On Moscow's opposition to the Romanian accelerated growth of heavy industry, see Liviu C. Țărău, *Între Washington și Moscova. România 1945-1965*, Editura Tribuna, Cluj Napoca, 2005, pp. 455-456.

² Michael Montias, *Economic Development in Communist Romania*, MIT Press, Cambridge Mass, 1967, pp. 188-193.

financial practices. It also questioned how bureaucratic structures could relate more efficiently to expert knowledge. For example, decision-making factors argued that increasing the number of state-owned apartments was unobtainable unless lowering the building costs. Soon after, architects and politicians resumed older discussions about blueprints' standardization, large-scale use of prefabricated components, building costs, or industrialization at large³. Held either behind closed doors over long professional and political meetings, or in the open within the pages of the national press, such discussions brought to the fore functionalist architecture as a cheap alternative to overly decorative Socialist Realism.

I propose to examine this shift from Socialist Realism to functionalist architecture that occurred in Romania by the late 1950s and early 1960s by considering the making of the new aesthetics in close connection with the availability of financial resources. So far, scholars of the communist regime have mostly investigated issues related to political repression, collectivization or propaganda, while social and economic aspects remained under-researched. The few works completed on the population's living standard stressed either the 1980s daily shortages⁴ or the implications of Nicolae Ceaușescu's pro-life policy⁵. Architects highlighted their precarious professional status during those years and showed little interest in how apartment blocks turned themselves into "actors" on the Romanian political scene⁶. In this respect, questions about a possible nexus between mass housing's aesthetics and attempts to overcome economic limitations remain unaddressed. How could the cost of housing influence the dynamics of national economic policies? Why is housing relevant in articulating a national agenda? To what extent could architectural design contribute to the (re)making of a national prestige within and beyond the socialist bloc? Such questions, nevertheless, need a closer look at the context in which this shift occurred – that is taking a trans-national approach to architectural aesthetics.

I premise that discussions on simplicity in architectural design were far from a Romanian affair. By the mid-1950s, the Soviet party boss Nikita

³ "Economic Aspects of Gheorghiu-Dej Report to November Plenum Analyzed", 4 December 1958. HU OSA 300-8-3-5345, p. 1, <http://hdl.handle.net/10891/osa:abadc2c3-4862-456f-a2a8-1f43c95f00a8> (accessed on 30 January 2017).

⁴ Adrian Neculau (ed.), *Viața cotidiană în comunism*, Iași, Polirom, 2004; Ruxandra Ivan (ed.), *"Transformarea socialistă". Politici ale regimului comunist între ideologie și administrație*, Polirom, Iași, 2009.

⁵ Corina Doboș (ed.), *Politica pronatalistă a regimului Ceaușescu (vol. 1): O perspectivă comparativă*, Polirom, Iași, 2010; Luciana M. Jinga (ed.), *Politica pronatalistă a regimului Ceaușescu (vol. 2): Instituții și practici*, Polirom, Iași, 2011.

⁶ See Ana Maria Zahariade, *Arhitectura în proiectul comunist. România 1944-1989*, Simetria, București, 2011; Miruna Stroe, *Locuirea între proiect și decizie politică. România 1954-1966*, Simetria, București, 2011.

Khrushchev argued that the best way to streamline the building industry would be a sober use of modernist principles by the socialist architecture⁷. While modernism has always been tied to mass housing projects, what is particular about Romania's case is the ambiguous context when modernism became a state policy. The national authorities resumed cultural and economic collaboration with the West in the mid-1950s. On the long-term, Romania benefited from this détente, even though the Soviets themselves endorsed and encouraged the dialogue across the Iron Curtain as part of a pragmatic agenda of securing up-to-date technology for the socialist countries. Architects extended contacts with their Western colleagues, a collaboration that greatly improved the national housing design; they also grew increasingly aware of the economic programs' social stakes. While this happened in other socialist countries too, Romania saw in industrialization and price efficiency a steady drive towards "independence" from the USSR, which delineates the national modernist architecture as a byproduct of entangled influences of economic policies, national agenda, the Soviets' constraints, scarcity, and opening to the West. From the Romanian authorities' point of view, therefore, increasing the mass housing's profitability could save important financial resources for other investments in heavy industry, while maintaining the appearance of a social state. Similarities between Soviet and Romanian modernist building projects suggested a coherent approach to housing throughout the bloc. However, this article will show that functionalist architectural modernism – cheap and fast to erect – also proved beneficial for Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej's economic plans, which questions urban construction projects' political agendas and the professional tensions between architects and economists. Therefore, investigating the functionalist architecture opens up several lines of inquiry. To what extent was Nikita Khrushchev's housing program transferred to Romania? How can we analyze the tortuous policies of the Romanian state's leadership in the field of housing? How did local bureaucratic or professional actors appropriate, interpret and adjust such programs? What were the economic costs of the new functionalist approach to urban dwelling? In this way, this article reads the making of functionalist mass housing programs in the late 1950s to assess the Soviets' part in building the Romanian cities. To this end, the article contributes to the recent scholarly literature on multiple modernities⁸.

⁷ Mark B. Smith, "Khrushchev's Promise to Eliminate the Urban Housing Shortage. Rights, Rationality and the Communist Future", in Melanie Ilic, Jeremy Smith (eds.), *Soviet State and Society under Nikita Khrushchev*, Routledge, London & New York, 2009, pp. 26-28; R.W. Davis, Melanie Ilic, „From Khrushchev (1935-6) to Khrushchev (1956-64): Construction Policy Compared”, in Melanie Ilic, Jeremy Smith (eds.), *Khrushchev in the Kremlin: Policy and Government in the Soviet Union, 1953-1964*, Routledge, London, 2011, pp. 206-207.

⁸ For a classic reading, see S.N. Eisenstadt, "Multiple Modernities", *Daedalus*, vol. 129, no. 1, Winter, 2000, pp. 1-29.

“Reading” Architectural Form

In what follows, I propose a methodological framework that uses archival documents to unveil the decision-making factor’s part in shaping aesthetic projects. My main goal here is to reinterpret a corpus of archival documents, which historiography usually reads through the totalitarianism’s lens, by considering the complex interactions occurred between individual and institutional actors. I argue that turning modernist architecture into a state policy was a “process” rather than an outcome of some inflexible decisions taken by diverse power structures⁹.

Recently, Stephen Kotkin remarked: “Behind closed doors, [party leaders] spoke the same way to each other when nobody else was listening as they spoke in the public propaganda [...] behind closed doors, communists were communists”. While introducing his latest book, Kotkin made a case for the archival documents’ scrupulous reading and argued that researchers should equally consider the empirical information itself and its putting into words. Looking at their language could aid comprehending the actors’ perspective, as their phrasing of ideas or opinions unveiled not only a discursive routine but a particular way of appropriating ideology and official regulations too. Thus, he pointed out how a way of speaking about politics could unveil more information on “power, where it comes from and in what ways and with what consequences it is exercised.”¹⁰. Such observation is particularly important here since the story of Romanian modernist mass housing programs fleshed out an aesthetic product shaped by different spoken “languages”. Although the aesthetic concept came from the Soviets’ headquarters, its making was not written by them. Instead, individuals’ engagement, their ideological literacy or divergent interests had a saying in how the project ultimately looked. This was the case for both politicians and architects. However, the involvement of professionals and decision-making factors did not occur along the same paths. Over the years, local architects blended professional values, university education, various international aesthetic influences, and political views. Therefore, the outcome of their work was hardly predictable; they often employed randomly elements taken from the national tradition, Western modernism and Soviet models, while the final product provided numerous instances of “original” adaptations of the role models. Furthermore, politicians related to the mass housing programs more to address social unrest than as an aesthetic agenda, and adjusted their actions under domestic and international circumstances. Actors were both enabled and controlled by their professional priorities, their visibility within the

⁹ For examples in other socialist countries, see Kimberly Elman Zarecor, *Manufacturing a Socialist Modernity. Housing in Czechoslovakia, 1945-1960*, University of Pittsburg Press, Pittsburg, 2011, pp. 5 and 118.

¹⁰ Stephen Kotkin, *Stalin: Paradoxes of Power, 1878-1928*, Penguin Books, New York, 2015, p. 1.

state, the bureaucratic functioning, and financial resources. Most of the time, they acted according to their status, which echoed local or national particular circumstances that adjusted the Soviet role model in many, sometimes even conflicting ways. Researchers should question the actors' familiarity with the ideological precepts, decide how those involved in housing projects "talked" about the building project, and if their "language" adjusted the aesthetic line in any way. One should read the document's structure through the eyes of those "present" there and corroborate such information with various phrasings used in the national and local newspapers.

Several categories of sources are useful here: transcripts of the governmental meetings, discussions between local leaders, documents resulting from the professional get-togethers, bureaucratic regulations, financial reports, and statistical data compiled under various circumstances. These sources unveil a myriad of discursive forms. The documents' content shows that those responsible with housing programs shared varying degrees of familiarity with the communist ideology, while their choices were the result of professional, bureaucratic and financial limitations, but also of their distance from the party's decision center. The documents can reveal a multitude ways of "speaking", depending on the decision-making's place in the party hierarchy or the administrative apparatus of the state, an issue particularly important during the formative years of socialism. On the one hand, the language used by Politburo or by the Council of Minister's politicians employed quite often ideological constructs. For a while, these leaders often looked up at the Soviet model and tried to apply it; some of them even claimed that this was the proper way to improve the Romanians' living standards. However, already in the early 1950s, several politicians argued that the regime should consider an alternative path in domestic affairs, which laid the premises for the incoming breakthrough in the socialist bloc's unity. On the other hand, however, the regional secretaries and other local officials shared a genuine concern for practical aspects. The semantic value of the Soviet influence loomed itself diluted at the local level, while the population's practices weighted more than some abstract theoretical constructs. In reading the building project and handling the aesthetic route, local actors rarely referred to ideological canons and stated, instead, concerns for financial resources, bureaucratic limitations or social unrests. To this end, I propose to investigate the structural changes in the making of aesthetic line by an alternative reading of the functionalist housing projects.

Does Form Matter?

Socialist Realism as Waste of State's Recourses

Unlike other countries in the Eastern Bloc, in Romania, Socialist Realism was institutionalized relatively late. Until November 1952, when the State Committee for Architecture and Construction was established, the party

bosses showed little concern for the building field. In the years that followed after the regime's change in December 1947, the communists' priorities revolved around the development of heavy industry, while the party's unity was shattered by never-ending internal struggles. It should not come as a surprise that under these circumstances housing programs ranked low on the official agenda. However, in the early 1950s, some social unrest forced the regime into reconsidering public investments, particularly in terms of spending for the dwellings' building. Beyond such pragmatic concerns, housing programs carried multiple ideological connotations. The way buildings looked was a political statement as much as an aesthetic one. In other words, since Romania aspired to fully integrating herself into the socialist bloc, the national architecture should have followed the same conceptual paths as in other East European countries. Yet, the buildings completed until 1952 displayed a fragmented use of the standard socialist realist constructs. In this respect, institutionalizing the new aesthetics called for some serious reevaluations of professional practices.

Moreover, some evidence suggests that the Soviet officials played an important part in these events. In June 1952, governmental officials mounted a Romanian architecture exhibition in Moscow. At that moment, they claimed that the exhibits would have provided a good opportunity to tell the Kremlin bosses about the national building projects completed in the country since 1948. However, the show had an unexpected outcome. Behind closed doors, the Soviet officials informed the Romanian delegates that their interpretation of the official canon was flawed; a common mistake identified by the Soviets consisted of an improper use of the national tradition by the socialist realist style. Moreover, although the new buildings would have served as "palaces for the working people", a large part of the Romanian achievements displayed an artificial combination of decorative neo-classical elements that carried no ideological meaning¹¹. These events had important consequences in Bucharest. Upon their return home, the Romanian officials have acknowledged that despite their efforts, the architectural style still had to align itself to the socialist realist canon "national in form and socialist in content". In November 1952, the Council of Ministers adopted several legislative measures to line up a local practice to the "older brother's" regulations; the national authorities created new institutions and sketched ambitious urban projects¹².

Over the following few years, the Romanians proved unsuccessful to completing large scale socialist-realist architectural projects. Between 1952 and 1954, the national authorities erected several housing estates in Bucharest, the Jiu Valley and Hunedoara. However, Socialist Realism had only a limited impact on the Romanian-built environment. Shortly after the November 1952

¹¹ ANIC, Fond Consiliul de Miniștri, file 88/1951, p. 2; Fond Stenograme birouri pe ramuri, file 6/1952, pp. 14-17; M. Rzanin, „Arhitectura Republicii Populare Române”, *Contemporanul*, 29 August 1952, p. 3.

¹² ANIC, Fond Consiliul de Miniștri, file 53/1953, p. 1.

governmental regulations, the Soviet adviser A.I. Zvezdin put some pressure on the Romanian institutional machinery to ensure that local practices would comply with the role models of Socialist Realism. In early 1953, he inspected the main building sites and unveiled many problems. Moreover, Zvezdin addressed aesthetic aspects, while the housing's poor quality or the general mess on the building sites remained mostly unmentioned. His critical report landed on the State Planning Committee's table just weeks after his on-site visits and demanded immediate actions. However, the Romanian governmental officials showed little concern for the Soviet adviser's demands. The national authorities' hesitation for bringing Socialist Realism to life had two causes. First, the urban labor force, for which the state arguably would have built those "palaces for the working people", seemed rather insensible to neoclassical decorations; instead, industrial employees saved no effort to state their dissatisfaction with the poor quality of the apartments' interior finishes. Second, the Romanian authorities did not have sufficient money to complete the planned housing projects. The amounts available, few and poorly managed, could hardly cover investments in heavy industry's infrastructure, while the communist leaders postponed periodically many of the social projects planned¹³.

Despite the Soviet advisers' case for a correct aesthetic practice, members of the Romanian government unveiled how such heavily adorned buildings were too expensive for the country's economic possibilities. For instance, Miron Constantinescu, the head of the State Planning Committee, argued that instead of paying too much attention to the buildings' aesthetic, the authorities should cut the cost price, motivate the builders, and diminish the theft of the construction materials. Furthermore, in 1953, Constantinescu pointed out towards the chronic waste of raw materials and demanded immediate actions to improve the builders' yield. One of the recurring themes at that time consisted of finding a solution to cut irregular expenditure, which could be achieved through a more judicious approach to the buildings' decorative features. Moreover, Constantinescu proposed to prioritize the Romanian localities according to their economic importance, so that the little financial resources available would be spent to ensuring a minimum everyday comfort in the most important areas of the country.

The Mid-1950s

As Romania's economy did not improve after Stalin's death, the regime faced difficulties to complete mass housing programs. By the mid-1950s, the authorities abandoned public investments and used the little financial resources

¹³ ANIC, Fond CC al PCR, Secția Cămarilor, file 102/1952, p. 2; Fond Consiliul de Miniștri, file 50/1953, pp. 2-3; Fond Consiliul de Miniștri-Stenograme, file 9/1953, pp. 136-137.

available for projects that could ease the social unrest fueled by the low living standards. This choice was a consequence of the recent outbursts in Hungary and Poland but also of the domestic blockages; the political leaders became increasingly aware that, unless they reconsidered the national economic drive, the country was in danger of destabilization. While politicians were still trying to consolidate their power positions within the state, external evolutions impacted directly upon the architectural design. Just months after Stalin's death in 1953, Socialist Realism came under political evaluation. The new simplicity that made its way into the official designs seemed rather an outcome of the widespread scarcity than of a re-engagement with inter-war modernism. To this end, aesthetics loomed itself again as a political project with strong ramifications in the Soviet Union. Nikita Khrushchev's speech held on December 7, 1954, at a meeting of the Soviet Architects, announced some major structural changes in the building industry. Despite the Soviet leader's open criticism against the main artisans of Socialist Realism, and not against the style itself, his speech built on the idea that distancing from the decorative excesses of the Stalinist aesthetics and embracing functionalism instead would improve the building industry's efficiency. However, these changes were hard to get by as over the next years Nikita Khrushchev fought to consolidate his position at the top of the CPUS, which pushed social projects somewhat on the side¹⁴.

In 1957, just months after his appointment as general secretary, Khrushchev announced that in ten years each family would receive access to an individual dwelling built from the state's funds. Researchers have recently pointed out the un-realist side of these goals; then, neither the Soviet Union nor the East-European socialist states had the technology or the industrial infrastructure to carry over such an ambitious project¹⁵. However, Khrushchev's promise functioned as a turning point in later approaches to mass-housing. Shortly after, the Soviet architects designed the blueprints for a new dwelling: the 24 square meters two-room apartment that would accommodate a family of three. Purely economical in scope, the project carried no ideological stakes. Nevertheless, the new political regulations afforded architects a good opportunity to reconsider ideas traditionally linked to Western modernism. After 1957, the professional language frequently used modernist concepts such as "rational intervention", "public integration", "architectural determinism", "public participation", or "centralized development versus regional and urban

¹⁴ Catherine Cooke, Susan E. Reid, "Modernity and Realism: Architectural Relations in the Cold War", Rosalind P. Blakesley, Susan E. Reid (eds.), *Russian Art and the West. A Century of Dialogue in Painting, Architecture, and the Decorative Arts*, Northern Illinois University Press, DeKalb, IL, 2007, pp. 172-194.

¹⁵ Mark Landsman, *Dictatorship and Demand: the Politics of Consumerism in East Germany*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. & London, 2005, pp. 173-179.

systematization". In June 1958, Moscow hosted the International Congress of Architecture, a professional gathering that showed that the problems faced by the architects from both sides of the Iron Curtain were, in many respects, similar¹⁶. From that moment on, the official professional language employed by Eastern European architects delineated a complex, yet highly selective, way of defining socialist modernity by permanent references to non-socialist design practices.

In Romania, the political program adopted in November 1958 employed many newly developed Soviet ideas about mass housing. In a speech held before the party delegates, Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej virulently criticized how some local bureaucratic structures handled the housing shortage. He voiced his dissatisfaction about the overly expensive apartment blocks erected in several important industrial centers of the country – the Jiu Valley and Hunedoara – where the dwelling space had been particularly scarce. Gheorghiu-Dej also pointed out towards the messy building sites, the uncommon high frequency of thefts and the high percentage of unskilled builders, which would have further worsened the situation. The solution seemed simple, yet radical. The political leadership assigned the architects the task to come up with a brand new dwelling type that would meet both the requirements of the workers' families and the party's expectations. After completing several on-site sociological surveys, the Romanian authorities argued that a 24 square meters two-room apartment would best accommodate a family of three. Furthermore, the authorities also pointed to a value of 40.000 lei as the optimum construction price, which was half of the average building price of a two-room apartment practiced in Romania at the time¹⁷.

A Soviet Model?

A glance of how modernist architecture resurfaced on the political agenda in 1958 may suggest that approaches to mass housing were similar throughout the socialist bloc. Turning modernism into a state policy involved a better comprehension of the population's daily needs as well as a systematic reorganization of the building industry. At the time, Romania was facing a severe housing shortage. Despite the official regulations that guaranteed each

¹⁶ "Congresul al V-lea al UIA", *Arhitectura RPR*, no. 7, 1958, pp. 16-20 and no. 10-11, 1958, pp. 61-66.

¹⁷ Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej, *Expunere făcută la şedinţa plenară a CC al PMR din 26-28 noiembrie 1958*, Editura Politică, Bucureşti, 1958, p. 14; "Un mareş program de activitate", *Arhitectura RPR*, no. 10-11, 1958, p. 4; "Extras din expunerea făcută de tovarăşul Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej la şedinţa plenară a CC al PMR din 26-28 noiembrie 1958", *Arhitectura RPR*, no. 10-11, 1958, p. 6-7; A. Lupescu, "Analiza economică a construcţiilor de locuinţe", *Arhitectura RPR*, no. 10-11, 1958, pp. 22-23.

person a minimum of eight square meters living space, there were many locations in the country where the available dwelling space hardly reached an average value of four square meters. Shortly, architects and engineers joined their efforts to improve the building technology and raise the number of finished apartments. Specialists traveled extensively abroad and aimed to find the best way to accommodate functionalist concepts to socialist architecture. To some extent, this effort paid off. Press articles announced impressive achievements over the subsequent years; accordingly, the number of finished apartments would have risen to several hundred thousand, while the living standard also improved.

Nevertheless, beyond these professional efforts, the building process rallied various “voices”, which often nourished conflicting comprehensions of the functionalist architecture’s political and social relevance. Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej’s demands for improving the building industry had many common features with Khrushchev’s, who had arguably stated that “the architect must become an artist who thinks at cost price”¹⁸. However, the two political leaders did not necessarily share identical views on constructive practices, much less on the function of urban space within the national economic and social systems. The Soviet leader’s fascination with modernist architecture went back many years. In the late 1930s, Khrushchev had tried to convince the Soviet authorities about the benefits of a rational approach to building industry but Stalin received his suggestions with disdain. He had to secure full control over the state before succeeding in reforming the building sector. For the Romanian leader, on the other hand, aesthetic aspects featured rather irrelevant. Neither in 1958 nor on any other occasion has Gheorghiu-Dej verbalized an opinion regarding an acceptable correct aspect of the housing estates. Gheorghiu-Dej’s plea for lowering the building costs dwelled on pragmatic arguments, and any reference to a modern architecture should not be divorced from the events occurred around the Party’s plenary meeting in November 1958, nor from its political stakes.

While a large part of the debates revolved around the building industry, the RWP’s plenary meeting announced additional economic reforms, as well. Other Eastern European countries opted for consumer industry, and promised firm, sometimes even unrealistic policies to improve the population’s living standards. The Romanian government, on the other hand, has planned a further growth of heavy industry, which called for a “social contract” between workers and the regime. As Linda Cooke has recently pointed out, adjusting the economic policies under the socialist economies’ increasing exposure to the

¹⁸ “Cuvântarea Tovarășului N. Hrușciiov la Consfătuirea Unională pentru Construcții, 12 aprilie 1958”, SJAN Hunedoara, Fond PCR – Județul Hunedoara, file 3/1958, pp. 76-103. See also R.W. Davies, *Soviet Economic Development from Lenin to Khrushchev*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998, p. 78.

international markets had turned workers irreplaceable¹⁹. The regime needed their productive capacity, and, to attain it, was willing to concessions. Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej claimed that within a few years each family would be sheltered into a newly built apartment. Thus, the Romanian authorities found in the Soviet housing program – reducing costs, rationalizing the living space, functionalism, minimal housing for nuclear families – a valid model for an efficient management of financial resources. Industrialization could resume only if combined with social programs but doing mass housing in a modernist way would have provided significantly more resources for the industrial projects themselves. The Romanian leadership combined these sophisticated social programs with a nationalist rhetoric.

The new approach to the built space unveiled how tensed institutional interactions occurred on various levels of authority. Behind closed doors, housing programs were rarely evaluated by their aesthetic value. In fact, despite the political readers' full responsibility in the decision-making process, completing housing programs depended on a number of bureaucrats who often read the regulations fragmentarily. For example, shortly after the party meeting in November 1958, governmental authorities resumed the institutional dialogue between the Bucharest headquarters and the local administrators. The Ministry of Construction and the State Planning Committee appointed several high functionaries to evaluate the local building programs and to assess the local management's responsibility. Checks carried out on this occasion revealed cases of theft and waste of materials, but also many conflicts between the local leaders. In Hunedoara, an industrial center located at a considerable distance from Bucharest, Gheorghe Hossu, the Minister for the Construction Works, was received with a certain hostility. To some point, the local functionaries admitted the allegations launched against them in November 1958 and stated that the building costs should be cut by half. Indeed, on many sites work stagnated, while wastage and high labor fluctuation raised the final price to enormous values. However, the Hunedoara bureaucrats criticized the central leadership for the discretionary management of financial resources through the centralized economic system. Both party members and bosses of the Hunedoara Steel Works, the industrial venture in the city, saved no effort to unveil their dissatisfaction over the lack of dialogue between state institutions. They also pointed out that the final price of housing would have risen because of inconsistencies between the plan's provisions and the availability of builders²⁰.

¹⁹ On social contract see Linda J. Cook, *The Soviet Social Contract and Why It Failed. Welfare Policy and Workers' Politics from Brezhnev to Yeltsin*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 1993.

²⁰ On a detailed discussion of these events see Mara Mărginean, *Ferestre spre furnalul roșu. Urbanism și cotidian în Hunedoara și Călan*, Polirom, Iași, 2015, pp. 146-157.

The local authorities' frustration, voiced in their dialogue with the Bucharest leaders, meant that the latest had enjoyed a certain amount of responsibility in handling the building project, which questions the aesthetic matters in terms of bureaucratic involvement. Moreover, the local leaders hardly made any evaluation of the housing projects beyond the building project itself. Minutes of the meetings held in Hunedoara unveiled a long array on prices, building figures, employees' wages, resources etc. Even the housing blueprints designed by the State Committee for Architecture and Constructions in Bucharest were analyzed in terms of cost efficiency. Furthermore, it happened more than once that the local bureaucrats challenged the building projects designed in Bucharest as inappropriate for sheltering the local workers and pressured the central political authorities to reconsider the dwellings' typology.

In fact, architects were little involved in the building process once the blueprint design phase was completed. The professional discourse revolved around how the newly built urban spaces would integrate local or regional specificity into the Romanian cities by a proper capitalization of local materials in tandem with a large scale use of prefabricated technologies and standardized projects. Their agenda was fully modernist in content, favoring a fresh reading of architectural design by numerous references to the Western practices. The texts published by *Arhitectura RPR*, the official magazine of the Architects' Union, contained no reference to the messy realities on the country's building sites. On the contrary, the texts appear tailored after different frameworks than the state's official agenda. In this respect, discussions about modernist architecture sketch an alternative perspective that places the Soviet Union ambiguously both as the main promoter of change in the Socialist Bloc and as a marginal element in the articulation of an independent national agenda.

Conclusion

Was modernist architecture part of a complex process of emancipation or a way to learn to speak a particular type of "socialism"? This article premised that similarities between East and West in architectural design made possible the alignment of East European and Western practices, a complicated process initially supported by the Soviets. But the particular manifestations coagulated in Romania unveiled an emancipator agenda that ignored the aesthetic dimension of architecture in favor of its economic potential. The profitability of investing in housing – functionalism and mass construction – was an expression of the political concern to industrial growth. In other words, the context of modernism's recovery served the pragmatic policies of Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej, which would become apparent in the early 1960s.